

Marcher's Merger (March 2003)

At the end of Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle," John Marcher decides that he has done nothing with his life, but the truth is that he had once accomplished something noteworthy, namely, he acquired an autonomous identity for himself, only this acquisition did not come cheap. The price Marcher pays for individuating is his suspicion, his fear, that he is fated for an encounter with a Beast, quite capable of destroying him. He pretends to hunt the Beast, but since he likely feels he deserves to be struck down by its attack, fears of retribution have him thinking more of evasion and reparation than of combat. So even though it will mean the loss of the considerable bounty individuation provided him with, Marcher ultimately decides to return to a symbiotic relationship with someone he felt he had once terribly wronged, in hopes that he might thereby forestall catastrophe.

The Beast arrives at the end of the story, and Marcher crumbles in face of such a terror, but when we first encounter him he fends off "beasts" quite ably and is no ordinary man. At Weatherend, he finds himself amongst a crowd so "wild" and "acquisit[ive]" that Marcher cannot avoid finding it "disconcerting" (62). He calls its constituents "dog sniffing," but composed of "heads [which] nodded quite as with the emphasis of an excited sense of smell" (61), they seem more like a hydra, more like one enveloping mass than an ensemble of particular beasts. It resembles in its uncontrolled aggressive desires and neediness what Margaret Mahler suggests is characteristic of the symbiotic milieu—that is, the child's original "undifferentiat[ed] [. . .] fusion with mother, in which the "I" is not yet differentiated from the "not-I," [. . .] [and which] contains an undifferentiated mixture of libido and aggression" (9). However, though Marcher registers their presence, he remains someone who more "observe[s]" (62) its tendencies than is affected by them. He is more master than subject, for he is, as Gert Buelens argues, in "possession of an ego that is sharply differentiated from that of others, to the point of lending one 'distinction' [a word that carries the double meaning of separateness and superiority]" (18). He therefore is not only safe from the dissolution of one's singular identity, one's self control, from returning to mental states established in our early childhood that a crowd effects upon its constituents (Main 64), but is exactly someone those still mired in a symbiotic state would want and hope to become.

Of course, it is likely that the typical modern would prefer to be more the rugged individualist than the isolated cosmopolitan, but Marcher manages something quite enviable in acquiring his own private sense of self. For individuation is scary, not only because it means the unknown but because it often means incurring the loss of what sustained us in our very first encounters with a brand new world: our parents' love. More specifically, since "at the beginning of life we have a disposition to anxiety and an extraordinary perceptiveness of maternal attitude affecting our survival" (Rheingold 89), it means the intolerable loss of our mothers' love. As Lloyd DeMause explains:

[I]mmature mothers and fathers [that is, mothers and fathers who themselves were not reacted to warmly, affectionately by their own parents] expect their child to give them the love they missed when they were children, and therefore experience the child's independence as rejection. Mothers in particular have had extremely traumatic developmental histories throughout history; one cannot severely neglect and abuse little girls and expect them to magically turn into good mothers when they grow up. [. . .] The moment the infant needs something or turns away from her to explore the world, it triggers her own memories of maternal rejection. When the infant cries, the immature mother hears her mother, her father, her siblings, and her spouse screaming at her. She then "accuses the infant of being unaffectionate, unrewarding and selfish . . . as not interested in me" [Brazelton and Cramer 11]. All growth and individuation by the child is therefore experienced as rejection. "When the mother cannot tolerate the child's being a separate person with her own personality and needs, and demands instead that the child mirror her, separation becomes heavily tinged with basic terror for the child" [255]. (151)

Though we can't be sure of what Marcher's childhood was like, he behaves in ways which accord with what we would expect of someone whose mother viewed her son's self-growth with suspicion and anger. Of the adult fate of such a child, we would, for example, expect him to either live selflessly or to do his very, very best to convince himself this is how he has been living. And, indeed, Marcher admits that his aim is to live in such a way that he might "regard himself, in a greedy, world, as [. . .] unselfish" (78), and toward this end tries to live "colourless[ly]" and generously (he

attends to the needs of those purportedly no less “unsettled” [78] than he is). He individuates, but tries to convince himself that his enabling autonomy, his precious “organic identity” (78), arose from constant self-sacrifice, and is therefore proof of his selflessness not his selfishness in life.

But Marcher hasn’t been as good as all that, for he individuated by making use of a “greedy world” and by associating with the grandiose. He prefers not to think of himself as “acquisiti[ve]” (62), but his autonomy was very likely facilitated by his acquisition of a whole “new” set of “friends” (63) and by repeatedly associating himself with far away places such as Rome, the “Palace of the Caesars” (65). His familiarity with his new friends makes those who remind him of old ones—in particular, May Bartram—difficult to become reacquainted with (67), and his familiarity with places where patriarch-fathers once ruled challenges the influence of his original dwelling place, the maternal home. Considering how many readers complain of Marcher’s selfishness, it is clear to most of us that he has been fulfilling his own needs as much as those of others, and given his hypersensitive response to Bartram’s suggestion that he wants something “all to [him]self” (73), Marcher likely knows he has been as well. He tells her, “It isn’t a question of what I ‘want’—God knows I don’t want anything” (73)—but it is in fact for “sin[ning] in that direction” (90) that he feels so strongly that something which “could possibly [. . .] annihilate [. . .] [him]” would “suddenly break out in [his] [. . .] life” (72). And since “fears of growth, individuation, and self-assertion that carry threatening feelings of disintegration lead to desires to merge with the omnipotent mother—literally to crawl back into the womb” (DeMause 94)—Marcher’s fears lead him to desire a return to a symbiotic state.

The Weatherend estate, a remainder, with its “old wainscots, old tapestr[ies], old gold, old colour[s]” (64), with its intense “poet[ic] and histor[ic]” resonance from a once-familiar and affecting effete past, is an appropriate site to “stage” (67) his re-emersion into a maternally dominated environment. May Bartram, so familiar with “the dates of the building [i.e., Weatherend], the styles of the furniture, the authorship of the pictures” (63), that the ghosts thought to haunt the great rooms might envy her familiarity with the place, who is “a part of the establishment” (63), is an appropriate person to serve as the representation of his mother returned. And so strong is his need to initiate symbiosis, that though Marcher encounters Bartram as someone who can “stray apart [so as to] feel in a proper relation” (62) to her “home,”

when she chooses to “drift toward [and talk to] him” (63), he quickly permits the loss of his composure and self-command in her presence. Though Marcher first boasts that “[h]er face and her voice [were] [. . .] all at his service now” (64), he soon “falter[s] [and] [. . .] fears he should only give himself away” (69), and eventually suggests he has “complete[ly] surrender[ed]” (72) himself to her.

Marcher’s surrender to Bartram means “surrendering the source of his superior uniqueness to a power that is located outside himself” (Buelens 20). It means the loss of his most prized possession, and Buelens is probably right to suggest that only “part of Marcher craves such a surrender of the autonomous self” (20). But even if part of him still struggles against such a loss, Bartram, who senses Marcher’s desire to have “something all to [himself]” (73), contrives means to ensure the totality of her dominance over him. Since Marcher’s independence was supported by the establishment of temporal and spatial distinctions between himself and his mother and childhood home, Bartram fuses herself into his sense of the intermittent years that have separated them so that Marcher comes to think that “[h]e hadn’t been” “alone a bit” (71). Since his independence was facilitated by linking himself to places with hypermasculine associations, she shifts their meeting place from the patriarchal home of the Caesars to Pompeii, a place subject to catastrophic dissolution and destruction (and a reminder of the Roman Empire’s own collapse). Bartram thereby collapses his preferred sense of himself as upright, independent, and respectable, and Marcher begins to suspect he is and always has been an “ass” (68). He still hopes he might in fact be a “hero” (88), but has become so dependent on another’s ostensible high opinion of him for some self-worth that he will be little more than a captive for the duration of the time he spends by Bartram’s side.

As Bartram now dominates and determines Marcher’s present and future existence, it is appropriate, with the acquisition of her inheritance, that she no longer is isolated and contained at ancestral Weatherend. She acquires a small home in London, and Marcher will come to know this home intimately and exhaustingly. We feel the weariness, the redundancy of his life there when we are told he “had turned once more about the little drawing-room to which, year after year, he brought his inevitable topic,” and when we are told that “generations of his nervous moods had been at work there” (86). These nervous moods are not, however, the product of his fears of a catastrophic visitation. Having returned to a symbiotic state, having returned to a mother-figure, those fears have been squelched: Marcher had “lost [his]

[. . .] sense” (88) of danger, and “his original fear [. . .] ha[d] [been] lost” (87). What Marcher experiences is neurosis. Its cause—lengthy confinement. His new home is as confining as a cage, as a tomb. And Bartram herself is not so much “his kind wise keeper” (81) as she is the grim reaper of his adult life and identity.

The narrator may think of her as something nearly as ghastly. He calls Bartram a “sphinx” (98), and later, a “creature” (120). In these instances he purportedly isn’t trying to be critical of Bartram, nor to link her to the Beast which hunts Marcher, but throughout his narrative he describes Bartram in a manner which cannot help but have us thinking of her as akin to the Beast. For example, when he describes Marcher considering whether he should allow “a lady” to “accompany” him “on a tiger-hunt,” that is, when he describes Marcher considering whether he will permit Bartram to share his “obsession,” we are told that Marcher’s concern was, that the “definite [sticking] point” was, the “inevitable spring of the creature” (79), and the damage it might cause her. The Beast, therefore, is something which springs and punctures—and so too is Bartram, who just a few sentences before was described as someone who, with her “penetrating questions[s],” caused the particular relationship she shares with Marcher to “spring into being” (79).

Since Bartram is the Beast itself, that is, his chosen representative of the vengeful mother who inspired his fears of a catastrophic visitation, Marcher ought to be more concerned with the trouble he invites upon himself by bringing her along than the trouble he thereby invites upon her. And he likely is. Just after Marcher makes an early attempt to characterize the nature of Bartram’s attendance to him as her accompanying him (79)—which will later settle in Marcher’s mind as her “watch[ing] with him” (82)—the narrator tells us at length about the effects of Bartram “watching him” (80). She watches him, we are told, “in silence,” “because people watch [. . .] best [. . .] in silence” (80). Watching in silence over her prey suits a tiger pretty well too, of course, and as if feeling himself stalked prey, Marcher shows signs of nervousness. In response to reflecting on “all the looking at his life, judging it, measuring it” over the “consecration of [. . .] years,” we are told that Marcher almost suspects that Bartram has special designs on him, that there is something peculiar in her interest in him: “she almost set him wondering if she hadn’t even a larger conception of singularity for him than he had for himself” (80).

Bartram’s eyes—very likely “the very eyes of the Beast” (87)—become conspicuously present in the narrative as soon as Marcher and Bartram become

attached to one another. Indeed, though Bartram and Marcher become isolated at the “margins” (83) of society, possessing a close, exclusive relationship that resembles in its exclusivity the bond between a mother and her young child, they seem part of their dyad. Their conspicuousness is appropriate in a story which explores a regression to a child-like state, because we first come to know our mother’s approval and disapproval through non-verbal signals (DeMause 151). And while Marcher is concerned that “the light in [Bartram’s] [. . .] eyes” (70) might communicate sarcasm and mockery (70, 72), they do not, at first, because Marcher is very much a prodigal son returned to keep her company. But her eyes, potentially both “cold” and “sweet” (105), become for him the “evil eye[s]” (116), the eyes that disapprove, and finally, the “eyes that didn’t know him” (118), the eyes that will abandon him as he prepares to leave her side.

We are never told that Marcher actually wants to leave Bartram, but we have reason to suspect he has been gauging what it would cost to leave her behind, guilt-free, from the moment of their re-union. Unfortunately, an adult often conceives of his or her individuation as so massive a crime that the cost is astronomically, outrageously high: he estimated he “had endless gratitude to make up” (71) to her. He will weather years of caged pacing (which had worn down the carpets much like the “desks in old counting-houses are worn by the elbows of generations of clerks” [86]), and, almost like a criminal before a parole board, hope that he has demonstrated sufficient penitence to warrant release. But since she has no intention of releasing him, she responds to his claim that her “curiosity isn’t being [. . .] repaid” (85) by insisting that she expects she “will be [. . .] repaid” (86), but, alas, that that time had not yet come.

Bartram proves as effective in ensuring Marcher never succeeds in justifying his departure from her as she was in ensuring his dependence upon her. Her close affiliation with him, for example, has negatively affected how people view her, and therefore not only adds more guilt to the “hump on [his] [. . .] back” (79) but simultaneously reduces the number of men he might slough her off on. Marcher knows that if he conceived of Bartram’s interest in him as selfishly, as opposed to unselfishly, motivated, he would have a way out, for “if she had been a totally different” woman and had made a “claim on him” (68), he would understand separation from her as perfectly justified. But Bartram, when she distinguishes Marcher from those men who have a “capacity to spend endless time with dull

women” (84), takes care to distinguish herself from the sort of women Marcher could more readily imagine owing little to. And so even though he well knows how pleasurable and empowering it is to be the one who listens rather than the one who *needs* to be listened to (78), since Bartram’s machinations are not countered by a capacity on his part to conceive of her as impurely motivated, he remains for an intolerably lengthy time “the only food for her [the tiger Beast’s] mind” (90).

But Marcher did individuate from his mother, and Bartram senses that he is finally near-prepared to separate from her as well. We know this principally because she inflicts upon him the worst sort of punishment imaginable, the punishment that (immature) mothers inflict upon their children for daring to leave them—namely, a mother’s abandonment, her rejection. This is the same punishment for fear of which Marcher reunited with a mother-figure in the first place. It is the same threat which made him have feelings of catastrophic annihilation, and the threat still kows him: “made [to] feel strangely abandoned” by “Bartram communicat[ing] with him as [if] across a gulf,” Marcher is afraid to “speak the wrong word” (99). We are soon made aware of just how much Bartram’s rejection concerns and affects Marcher. We hear that “withdrawal [was] imposed on him” (107), that “she had deceived him” (108), that “she dismissed him” (109), that “access to her [. . .] was almost wholly forbidden him” (114), that “[n]ot only had her interest failed him, but he seemed to feel himself unattended” (115), and that, after starting off on a current together (76), Marcher was “too helplessly at sea” (110). And though there are signs, as when he eventually braves telling her, “you abandon me” (103), that Marcher will brave her punishment and force his way free of her, Marcher’s escape is ultimately only brought about by Bartram’s demise.

After her death we are told that Marcher begins a “hunt” for “[t]he lost stuff of consciousness [which had become] [. . .] for him as a strayed or stolen child to an unappeasable father” (117). Marcher hunts, tries to recover, the lost stuff of consciousness he had most prized—his independent ego. He lost it by reuniting with the mother-figure Bartram, by turning to a representative of his mother, and could not recover it owing to her unappeasable need for attendance and love. Marcher, however, would not mind being likened to a father, for Marcher needs to restore the masculine supports that had earlier assisted his development of an independent identity. And it is therefore no surprise that Marcher travels and visits the “temples of gods and the sepulchres of kings” (119), that is, that he once again, though this time

with Pharaohs, associates with them. Only afterwards does he revisit Bartram's grave.

There we are told he was reminded that he had "once lived" and was "dependent on [the sense of this] not alone for a support but for an identity" (121). But though the narrator tries to convince us that Marcher's return to traveling, to mobility, and to sites associated with patriarchs had little effect upon him, that he in fact "turned for nobleness of association" (120) towards Bartram's grave, Marcher relearned *abroad* what it was to have lived and to possess an identity he would prefer not to lose. For when he returns home to visit Bartram's grave we are told that "[t]he plot of ground, the graven tablet, the tended flowers affected him so as belonging to him that he resembled for the hour a contented landlord reviewing a piece of property" (120). We are reminded of the crowd at Weatherend, with their wild dreams of acquisition; we are reminded of how he once stood amongst them, a man of distinction; and understand that Marcher has again become someone whose stature makes Bartram "all at his service now" (64).

So though its importance is played down in the text, Marcher likely journeyed to the Egyptian desert in hopes that the echoing sounds of "the past glories of Pharaohs" (119) would counter the results of Bartram's sphinx-like silent presence. And they do, but rediscovering his independence will also mean an eventual return of the terrible fear—again, a fear he had lost while in Bartram's attendance—of being punished for possessing it. For Bartram told a mistruth when she speculated that Marcher had lost his fear because he had "[l]iv[ed] with it for so long" (87). Instead, the fear, in a sense, left him—for as long as he was willing to abandon his claim to his own life. Though his fear was not "lost in a desert" (87), for visiting the land of the Pharaohs and for once again beginning the process of individuation, he once again finds himself terrified by the prospect of the Beast's lunge. So much so that when he "perceive[s] [. . .] by a stir of the air" the "huge and hideous" Beast "rise," in order to avoid it, he once again returns to the mother-figure Bartram—this time by "fl[inging] himself, face down on [her] [. . .] tomb" (127).

The narrator's description of the Beast's leap at the end of the story gives us a sense of the sort of truly terrifying visitation for fear of which Marcher reunited to a mother-figure in the first place. Given that linking himself to Bartram forestalled its arrival, we should understand just why someone would choose to enter a relationship that would shear him of his preferred sense of self. But most critics of "The Beast in the Jungle" are not inclined to sympathize with Marcher. Instead, they judge him

cruelly insensitive to Bartram, and rise to her defence.

A few scholars are trying to establish that Bartram does little to warrant a sympathetic reaction, but their efforts to influence the preferred sense of her may be frustrated by the inclination of readers to conceive of her as saintly. Gert Buelens, one of the critics intent on “dethroning May Bartram” (18), is also one aware that this requires something more than pointing to the abundant textual evidence which illustrates her sadism and greed. When he writes that “the most common readings” (17) of Bartram are “*suspiciously* close to Marcher’s [own] perception of her throughout the story” (18; emphasis added), he clearly senses that critics seem near compelled to accept Marcher’s high estimation of Bartram’s worth and his low estimation of his own; and, if we recognize their relationship as one between mother and son, many of us *may in fact be drawn* to praise Bartram and to criticize Marcher, for we are “enjoined to show love for the mother, and failure to do so carries a threat, for the child must protect the mother’s defenses against her perception, and the perception by others, of her lack of motherly feeling or her hostile impulses. One *must* love his mother, or perish, or at least suffer guilt” (Rheingold 201; emphasis in original). When we praise Bartram, we establish her blamelessness, and since she represents our own mothers, we thereby feel less deserving of persecution. When we criticize Marcher we are trying to distinguish ourselves from his own self-centeredness, but are actually imitating his manner of establishing his own moral purity. Since many of us, unfortunately, *are* like Marcher, in that we inhibit “the fulfillment of [our] [. . .] emotional needs and wants [so as to avoid] [. . .] some unspeakable punishment or tragedy” (Branden 97), Marcher will likely receive a more sympathetic reaction only when fewer of us share his fear that our own self-growth has earned us a catastrophic visit by the Beast.

Works Cited

- Bell, Millicent. *Meaning in Henry James*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991. Print.
- Branden, Nathaniel. *Honoring the Self: The Psychology of Confidence and Respect*. New York: Bantam, 1985. Print.
- Buelens, Gert. “In Possession of a Secret: Rhythms of Mastery and Surrender in “‘The Beast in the Jungle.’” *The Henry James Review* 19.1 (1998): 17-35. Print.
- DeMause, Lloyd. “The Evolution of Childrearing.” *The Journal of Psychohistory* 28.4 (Spring 2001): 362-451. Print.

- . "The Psychogenic Theory of History." *The Emotional Life of Nations*. New York: The Institute for Psychohistory, 2002. 10 March 2003. Web.
- . "War as Righteous Rape and Purification." *The Emotional Life of Nations*.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *Tender is the Night*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995. Print.
- Heyns, Michiel. "The Double Narrative of the 'The Beast in the Jungle'. Ethical Plot, Ironical Plot and the Play of Power." *Enacting History in Henry James: Narrative, Power and Ethics*. Ed. Gert Buelens. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 109-25. Print.
- Izzo, Donatella. *Portraying the Lady: Technologies of Gender in the Short Stories of Henry James*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001. Print.
- James, Henry. "The Beast in the Jungle." *The Novels and Tales of Henry James* New York Edition, Volume XVII. New York: Charles Scribner, 1909. Print.
- Koenigsberg, Richard A. *Symbiosis and Separation: Towards a Psychology of Culture*. New York: The Library of Art and Social Science, 1989. Print.
- Leitch, Vincent B. et al., eds. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001. Print.
- Mahler, Margaret. "Aggression in the Service of Separation-Individuation." *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 50 (1981): 631-52. Print.
- Main, Tom. "Some Psychodynamics of Large Groups." *The Large Group: Dynamics and Therapy*. Ed. Lionel Dreeger. London: Karnac, 64-86.
- Rheingold, Joseph C. *The Mother, Anxiety, and Death: The Catastrophic Death Complex*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1967. Print.
- Scribner, Charles III. Introduction. *Tender is the Night*. By F. Scott Fitzgerald. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995. iv-xv. Print.
- Sedgwick, Eve K. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1990. Print.
- Weston, Marisa Dillon. "Anorexia as a Symbol of an Empty Matrix Dominated by the Dragon Mother." *Group Analysis* 32 (1999): 71-85. Print.
- Wharton, Edith. *The Age of Innocence*. New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1993. Print.